

DESMOND'S MODEL.

BY MARY E. PENN.

I.

FOUR o'clock on a sultry June afternoon.

The sun beat fiercely on the Tuscan landscape; not a cloud dimmed the burning blue of the sky. The Apennines were dreaming in a haze of heat which softened their rugged outlines; in the valley of the Secchia the river rippled languidly over its stony bed, bereaved of its myriad tributary streams. The grass was burnt brown, the vines were white with dust; only the olive-trees looked cool, with their soft grey-green foliage, vaguely suggesting mist and moonlight.

Dust, drought, and sultry silence, broken only by the cigala's tiny chirp, prevailed over all the landscape.

At the end of the valley farthest from Lucca a rough, zigzag road winds upwards into the solitude of the hills. Two figures were just now toiling up the steep ascent; not Tuscan peasants, but a couple of Englishmen, in dusty tweed suits, each having a bundle of artists' traps strapped above his well-worn knapsack. The taller of the two stepped out at a good pace some yards in advance of his companion, singing "Mandolinata" in a musical baritone; the other, who was some years older, and of a stouter build, plodded on stolidly behind him, pausing now and then to wipe his forehead, and grumble at the heat. His pauses grew more frequent as they proceeded, for the road got steeper at every yard. At length, when a sudden turn revealed another long ascent before them, he uttered a smothered groan, and, stopping abruptly, hailed his companion.

"Hallo—Desmond!"

The latter turned. "What is it?"

His friend only beckoned in reply, and, sitting down on the sun-burnt turf by the road-side, unstrapped his knapsack, and leaned back with a long sigh of relief. Desmond paused a moment, then came leisurely back, humming the conclusion of his song. He was as handsome a young fellow as you will meet in a summer day. Fair, but sunburnt, with curly brown hair, frank, happy blue eyes, and a smile whose caressing sweetness few men, and still fewer women, could resist. He was dressed with an odd mixture of dandified nicety and Bohemian carelessness. A paint-stained coat and battered brigand hat seemed little in harmony with his superfine linen, to say nothing of the diamond ring on his little finger, which showed to advantage at this moment, as he stood twirling the ends of his moustache, and looking down at his friend on the bank.

"Well, old fellow, what's the matter?"

"The matter is that I am dead-beat. Not another step can I go up this heart-breaking hill."

"Is it, then, your intention to spend the night on that bank?"

"It is my intention to rest here till after sunset at all events; unless some good Samaritan with a cart happens to pass by, and will give me a lift."

"Well, but my good fellow, you must be shockingly out of condition to be so easily knocked up. The fact is, Thorburn—don't be offended—you are getting fat."

"Fat!" Thorburn sat upright to give emphasis to his indignant protest. "Fat! it's a libel. I was never in better training. But on a road like this, with the thermometer at heaven knows how much in the shade ——"

"Stop, stop!" interrupted Desmond, laughing. "I retract. I apologise. It is the heat, of course. You see we left Lucca an hour too late this morning ——"

"Yes, you were flirting with that pretty American widow at the Hotel del' Universo; otherwise ——"

"How could I better employ myself while you were snoring, you lazy humbug. If you had got up when I called you, instead of pitching a boot at me, and going to sleep again, we should have been at San Giovanni-della-Rocca by this time."

"Well, if you are in a hurry to reach San-what-its-name, go on, and leave me to follow at my leisure."

"In a hurry? not I," Desmond returned, throwing himself on the grass at his friend's side, and lighting a cigar. "I am quite content to sit in the sun, and let things take their course."

A pause of meditative puffing.

"How still it is; how lonely, how grand! What a noble purple on those distant hills! One might be content to stay here for ever—'the world forgetting, by the world forgot.'"

"The world would forget us soon enough, you may be sure," muttered Thorburn. "A short memory is one of its many pleasing ——"

"Shut up, you old cynic, and don't abuse the world," interrupted Desmond. "It has its faults, no doubt; but:—"

'Until you can show me a happier planet,
More genial and bright, I'll content me with this.'"

He sang the lines, and then clasping his hands under his head, watched the smoke curling up from his cigar.

Thorburn gave him a glance, half envious, half admiring, and wholly affectionate. In spite—or, perhaps, because of the difference in their characters—they were fast friends. They had been chums at school, fellow-students at the same drawing academy, and started abreast on the race of life. Desmond had already distanced his companion, but that fact had in no degree affected their friendship.

"Yes, you find it a jolly place, no doubt," said Thorburn. "So should I, if I were in your shoes, with not a care to burden me."

"That remark shows how little you know me," replied Desmond. "Cares? I have heaps of them! I was brooding over one when you hailed me just now. Here we are, nearly at the end of our tour, and I have not yet found a model for my 'Lucretia Borgia.' If she doesn't turn up soon that great picture, which was to take the public by storm next May, will never be painted."

"I thought you found her at Lucca. The coppersmith's handsome wife ——"

"A glorious creature; but she was dark, my dear boy," interrupted Desmond, raising himself on his elbow. "Now, la Borgia was a golden blonde; there is a lock of her hair in the Ambrosian Library at Milan. Are you listening?"

"Yes," Thorburn answered, drowsily. "Well, perhaps you'll find her at San Giovanni: who knows? Suppose you go on, and look for her, and if there is a conveyance of any sort in the place, you can send down for me. Pray go."

"Disinterested advice!" laughed the other, as he rose and shook himself. "Would a wheelbarrow suit you, *faute de mieux*? If there is anything in the place that will carry you, I'll send it; but if it doesn't arrive in an hour's time you had better walk on. Remember, we are to put up at the 'Aguila Nera,' in the Piazza."

He went a few yards, then paused, and stooped to read the half-defaced inscription on a boundary-stone which marked the point where a path branched off to the left.

"I shall go this way," he called out, looking back: "it is rougher, but shorter, I fancy."

"Stick to the road," was Thorburn's caution.

"It *is* the road, unless this thing fibs like a tombstone. 'San Giovan' del'——and some hieroglyphic, intended, no doubt, for Rocca. It's all right. *A rivederci!*"

And he was gone.

Having watched him out of sight, Thorburn settled himself luxuriously on the turf, put his knapsack under his head for a pillow, and in five minutes was fast asleep.

The golden afternoon waned towards evening. As the sun declined, deep, gloomy purple shadows spread up the slopes, and gradually enfolded the hills like an imperial mantle. A rosy light still lingered on the peaks, but the valleys were lost in soft, mysterious gloom.

At length Thorburn woke, feeling chilled and stiff, and having only a hazy idea of where he was. Looking round, he was startled at the lengthening shadows, and hastily buckling on his knapsack, set off again. Having a rooted distrust of "short cuts," however plausible, he kept to the main road.

Soon, the sun's red rim dropped out of sight behind the farthest

mountain range ; the brief twilight was quickly past, and "with great strides came the dark." The sky was soon all luminous with stars ; then a ghostly light like dawn spread upwards from behind the cleft summit of La Pagna, and presently out of that light rose the full-orbed moon.

The artist trudged on in the silence and the moonlight, his feet falling noiselessly on the dusty road, where himself was the only living object visible for miles. Once a convent-chime, ringing for the Benediction Offices, sounded musically from a neighbouring hill-side, and a little church, hidden among olive woods in the valley below, answered with a single cracked bell. Then there was silence again ; the majestic silence of the hills, fraught with solemn meaning.

At length, another turn of the weary way brought him in sight of his destination—an ancient, world-forsaken little town, perched on a rocky eminence, dark against the stars ; its brown, sun-baked houses nestling round a ruined citadel, athwart whose rents the moonlight slanted.

Up a steep stretch of road, with horizontal lines of rough stone paving at intervals, like the rungs of a ladder ; past a wayside crucifix, with a blind beggar sitting on the steps at its foot ; over a bridge which spanned the dry bed of a water-course, under an arch in a massive wall, where a dim oil-lamp burnt before the shrine of "Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows," and into a crooked, dark, ill-smelling street, where the houses seemed to meet overhead, shutting out the sky.

The day's work was over, and the townspeople stood about in the arched doorways and on the steep steps of their houses to take the fresh air—"pigliare il fresco"—though it was still hot and close enough in the narrow ways, where there was a mixed smell of garlic and melons and wine and polenta, with here and there a whiff of odours less ambrosial.

Women with white head-gear leaned out of the unglazed casements ; men lounged on the pavement playing at "Morra ;" brown, half-naked children played and fought in the gutters. Someone was strumming a mandoline, and singing a plaintive Tuscan "Rispetto."

The street emerged into a paved square, on one side of which stood the church, a quaint, ancient edifice, with a Lombard tower, and an open belfry, where the bats were flitting in and out among the bell-ropes ; and on the other, the inn, a flat-roofed, stone-galleried house, with one wide doorway.

The inevitable group of gossips lounged on the steps ; the cooper and the baker, and the little barber from next door, and the barber's stout wife, with a baby in her arms, so tightly swaddled that it looked like a wooden doll. The landlord surveyed the group from the doorway, which he completely filled ; a burly, good-tempered looking man, with a large, clean-shaven, olive face, and a shining bald head.

On Thorburn's approach the conversation ceased, and half a dozen dark eyes were turned upon him, curiously, but not rudely. The men made way for him to pass, uncovering, with grave courtesy, while the "padrone" bowed himself backwards into the house, with a gesture which placed himself, his establishment, and all his belongings at the traveller's disposal.

The door opened at once upon a great bare sala, with stone floor, frescoed walls, and a rafted ceiling, from which an oil-lamp was suspended by a chain.

"My friend has arrived, I suppose?" the artist said, glancing round.

The innkeeper paused in the middle of a bow, and looked at him inquiringly.

"The signor expected to meet a friend here?"

"Certainly; he went on first, and must have arrived two or three hours ago."

The other shrugged his shoulders with a deprecating smile, and gesture of his outspread palms.

"I have not had the honour of welcoming this gentleman. The signor himself is the only traveller who has arrived here to-day."

"Perhaps he has gone to some other inn," Thorburn began, "though he certainly said ——"

"Excuse me, signor, there is no other. L'Aguila Nera is the only inn of San Giovanni."

And the group at the door, who were interested and attentive listeners, promptly confirmed the padrone's statement. Thorburn looked perplexed.

"I fear he must have lost his way," he said, after a pause. "He was probably misled by the inscription on a boundary stone, where a path ——"

"Ecco! that leads to St. Giovanni-in-the-Vale, a village two leagues and a half from here!" half a dozen voices exclaimed at once.

"Then he will certainly not be here to-night," the artist remarked, as he threw his knapsack on the table and sat down. "What sort of place is this other St. Giovanni? There is an inn, I suppose, where he could put up?"

"Ma sì, there is an inn—of a sort," mine host assented with a shrug, as he spread a coarse white cloth over one end of the long oaken table. "Alessandro Morelli's. Not in the village itself, but on the hill-road, half an hour's walk beyond. It stands on the site of an ancient Carthusian monastery. Morelli bought the land for a song, ruins and all, and built himself a house out of the old stones. Some say it was sacrilege, and that the house is accursed ——"

"The man is," put in the cooper in an undertone.

"Keep thy tongue quiet, Tonio mio," the host returned, with a grave, cautionary nod. "We know nothing against 'Sandro Morelli, except that he is sullen and unsociable, and that he is jealous of his

wife ; and as she is a handsome woman, nearly twenty years younger than himself, that is excusable."

"Bella bellissima—la Bianca!" exclaimed the little barber, rapturously. "Per Baccho, if I had a wife as handsome—no offence to thee, mia gioja," he added, turning to his fat, and decidedly plain "better half"—"I should be jealous as Bluebeard—via!"

"And what handsome woman would marry a snippet like thee?" his "joy" returned composedly, on which there was a general laugh.

"Brava, Caterina," exclaimed the landlord. "Your tongue is sharper than Nello's razors. Yes, Bianca is beautiful," he continued; "but, to my thinking, there is something uncanny about her. She has a frozen look. Her face is like a lovely mask, and what the soul behind it may be, Heaven only knows."

"She is unhappy, perhaps," Thorburn suggested, wondering whether this beautiful "uncanny" woman would prove to be the model Desmond had been seeking.

"How should she be otherwise with such a husband as she has got?" demanded the barber's wife shrilly. "Santa Maria! if he were mine, I'd cure him of 'jealousy,' I'll warrant you."

"Ay, your face would cure him of that, mia bella," remarked her husband drily: and this time the laugh was against her.

"Ebbene, my friends," said the landlord, as he set knife and fork, plate and glass, before his guest; "it is getting late, and as the signor's supper will be ready in the space of a credo——"

The visitors took the hint in perfect good part, and at once withdrew, wishing the stranger "buona notte."

The supper was not long in making its appearance. It consisted of a basin of vegetable soup, flavoured with grated cheese, a portion of roast kid, smoking hot, a scrap of Parmesan, on the same plate with half a dozen wizened little apples, and a cup of black coffee to conclude with. Everything that was not flavoured with cheese tasted more or less of garlic. However, a flask of capital Monte Pulciano made amends for the defects of the cuisine, and when he had finished it, and had taken a stroll in the Piazza, where the quaint shadow of the church lay black across the moon-whitened pavement, the artist asked to be shown to his room.

It proved to be a long, drafty apartment with a tiled floor; clean enough, but supremely uncomfortable. However, too used to roughing it to be critical, he soon "turned in," leaving the lamp burning. Tired as he was, it was some time before he slept.

Fragmentary recollections of the past day haunted him; the hill scenery unrolled before him in an endless panorama; he heard the convent bells; the tinkling mandoline; the voices of the gossips at the inn door. Then his thoughts reverted to Desmond, whom he pictured arriving next morning, brisk and blithe, and debonair, making himself at home in the place at once, joking with the host, rambling about the old town in search of his "Lucretia Borgia,"

and incidentally making acquaintance with every man, woman, and child he encountered.

With a smile at the thought, Thorburn at length fell asleep.

How long his sleep lasted he never knew. He woke with a start—woke completely, passing without transition from the deep insensibility of dreamless slumber into full consciousness—and sat up in bed, looking round him with a bewildered stare.

Had he dreamt it, or had he really heard Desmond calling him?

He listened. Within and without the house all was profoundly still; so still that he could hear the owls hooting in the wide dark country outside the walls of the town.

He sprang out of bed and went to the window; perhaps Desmond was waiting for admittance, in the street below?

Half in the forlorn light of the waning moon, half in the black shadow of the church, the Piazza lay, bare, silent, solitary; with no living creature visible save a vagabond dog, creeping stealthily across it. The town was silent as a city of the dead; in the distance the owls still hooted mournfully with a sound of "Woe—woe!"

As he leaned on the window-ledge looking out, and pondering over his strange delusion, a curious feeling of numbness and insensibility began to creep over him. It was as though a thick veil or cloud were gradually interposed between his senses and the outer world. There was an interval of blank unconsciousness, from which he awoke—into a dream. His wide-open eyes were still fixed on the Piazza, but with some mysterious inner vision he beheld a quite different scene; one utterly unfamiliar to him.

He was standing, he thought, in the interior of a half-ruined tower, which seemed to have been the Campanile of some church or chapel. Through a breach in the walls he could see, outside, a large weed-grown courtyard, with the remains of a cloistered walk at one side, and at the end a low stone house, half hidden by trees.

Suddenly he heard Desmond's voice calling him. It seemed to come, hollow and muffled, from beneath the flooring of the tower, under his feet. He looked round, and noticed for the first time a low, arched door in one of the massive walls. It was open, showing a flight of worn stone steps, leading to a vault or crypt below.

He was not conscious of changing his position, but the next moment he seemed to be in the crypt. It had a damp and earthy odour, and was profoundly dark, except where a faint mysterious light at one end showed him—Desmond, stretched on the damp stones, in a pool of his own blood.

The shock of horror which ran through him at that sight, broke the spell. His vision suddenly faded into darkness; gradually, as it had gathered, the cloud passed from his perceptions, and he regained consciousness, to find himself still standing at the window, with his eyes fixed on the moonlit Piazza.

He sank into a chair, passing his hand over his damp forehead. His heart beat tumultuously ; his mind was in a whirl. What had he seen ?

Was it only a waking dream—an hallucination—the result perhaps of over fatigue ? No ; it was far too real, too vivid ! That terrible picture seemed burnt into his brain ; when he closed his eyes he could still see it, painted on the darkness ; and Desmond's voice—urgent, imploring, reproachful—rang in his ears ; a passionate, despairing summons, uttered in a moment of supreme peril. Had it reached him too late ?

The thought went through his heart like a knife. He started to his feet, resolved to lose no more time in vain conjectures, but to get ready at once, and be away with the first gleam of morning in search of his friend. Already the moon and stars were paling, as a faint cold light crept upwards from the east, and by the time that he was dressed the sky was flushed with the lovely rose of dawn.

II.

HALF an hour later, Thorburn passed out of the gate, under the shrine of " Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows," and went his way down the steep road, leaving behind him the forlorn little town on its rocky height, dark against the dawn, as last night he had seen it dark against the stars.

Beautiful beyond telling was the scene which stretched before him, bathed in the ineffable brightness and stillness of early morning. The bare and melancholy Apennines, transfigured by the flush of sunrise, looked radiant, rose-coloured, ethereal ; like mountains in a fairy tale, or a dream. The valleys were still white with mist, but here and there a rent in the gauzy veil disclosed distant towns and villages ; a monastery or hillside belfry gleaming white from amidst woods of olive or chestnut. The swallows wheeled high up in the luminous air ; little golden-green lizards basked in the sunshine ; myriads of yellow butterflies flitted past, like leaves that the light breeze scatters in sport.

Everything seemed full of life and joy this radiant summer morning, and, in spite of himself, Thorburn felt the influence of the scene. He could not altogether shake off the vague apprehension which oppressed him, but he felt, somehow, relieved and reassured. Out here, in the air and the sunlight, supernatural fears seemed absurd.

The dew was still on the grass when he reached St. Giovanni-in-the-Vale ; a squalid, straggling village, with one " long, unlovely street ;" where fowls, pigs and children disported themselves indiscriminately.

On making enquiries he found that Desmond had not been seen in the place the day before, but a little goat-herd—a grinning, white-

toothed, sunburnt urchin—had passed him “just after sun-down, on the hill-road, not far from 'Sandro Morelli's.”

Without a moment's delay Thorburn set off again.

The road, which wound upwards out of a thickly wooded valley, was little more than a waggon track; dry and crumbling, and strewn with pebbles, like the bed of a torrent. He had followed it for some distance before he reached any habitation, and then it was only a solitary farmhouse standing back from the road, with a few poor fields of maize and corn, and a little grove of chestnut trees at the side.

A man was digging in the field close to the house, and Thorburn approached him to learn how far he still was from his destination.

On being addressed, the other shook back a tangled mane of black hair and looked up. He was a muscular, broad-shouldered fellow, of the type which, in Tuscan phrase, is “moulded with the fist, and polished with the pick-axe;” with a sombre, olive-tinted face, and fierce, haggard dark eyes. His blue and white shirt was open at the neck, showing a massive brown throat; his bare feet were thrust into wooden shoes.

He stuck his spade into the ground, and looked his interlocutor over at his leisure before he replied, nodding over his shoulder at the building behind them. “There it is.”

“That! But that is a farm, not an inn.”

“Call it what you like. There is the house, and here am I, 'Sandro Morelli, if you want me.” And he went on digging.

The artist turned to look at the house, and noticed for the first time that the bough which serves in lieu of sign at the humbler class of Osterias, hung over the door. It was a poor place, roughly built of great blocks of stone which had evidently once served a more dignified purpose. No ruins were to be seen from the road.

“A friend of mine, an Englishman, put up here last night,” Thorburn resumed; “shall I find him indoors?”

The man looked up again, shading his eyes from the sun.

“You are mistaken; your friend did not put up here. We had no guest in the house last night.”

Thorburn started, looking at him in doubt and incredulity.

“But—but there is no other inn where he could have lodged, and when last seen he was close to your house.”

“When was that?”

“Just after sunset yesterday.”

“I was out then; my wife may have seen him pass. You can ask her; there she is.”

The artist turned towards the house, and found himself in the presence of the loveliest woman he had ever seen or dreamed of. She stood in the doorway, like a radiant picture in a dark frame; “a daughter of the gods, divinely tall, and most divinely fair.” She was in the noontide of her beauty; her figure full, but not

heavy, her small head nobly set above the rounded throat and shoulders. Her complexion was of that warm whiteness which an old poet calls "a golden pallor;" hazel eyes, soft as velvet, looked out from under level brows; rippled hair, of a rare and lovely shade of tawny gold, was coiled in superb luxuriance round her head.

"Half light, half shade she stood ;
"A sight to make an old man young."

But her face had an expression which seemed out of harmony with its radiant and gracious beauty; a fixed, inscrutable look, like that which perplexes one sometimes in the marble features of some antique statue, whose legend is long forgotten.

"Speak, then," her husband said roughly; "you heard the question."

"A gentleman—a signor inglese—passed by yesterday evening, after sunset," she answered, addressing Thorburn.

"Passed by?" he repeated; "did he not come to the house?"

There was a pause before she answered. Her husband looked up at her, with his foot on the spade.

"He came to the door," she said slowly, looking at him, and not at her questioner. "I was standing here, and he asked me for a glass of water."

"And then?" Thorburn interrogated anxiously. "That was not all?"

"What more should there be?" the man exclaimed impatiently; "he asked for a glass of water, and when he had drunk it, went on his way."

Thorburn glanced from one to the other, and after a moment's pause, said quietly: "I have had my walk for nothing it seems. I will rest a few moments if you please, and taste your wine, before going further."

As Bianca drew back for him to pass, her eyes met his with a look that thrilled and startled him. Fear, warning, entreaty—what did that eloquent glance express? He felt that it was full of significance if he had but the clue.

The door opened upon the kitchen, a quaint, homely place, with coarse frescoes on the walls, gaudy cups and plates displayed on a cupboard, and a waxen image on the chimney-piece. One wide unglazed casement, with prison-like bars across, looked out upon the fields; opposite the entrance was another door, closed. The room was hot and close, pervaded by a musty smell of dried herbs and beans and onions.

The man followed them in at once, and half sat, half leaned on a table under the window, with his back to the light.

Moving like Juno, and looking, in her homely dress, like a queen in disguise, Bianca placed before the visitor a flask of wine and half a loaf of coarse bread.

"Are there any remains of the convent which once stood here?" he asked, as he poured out the wine. "I see no ruins."

"They are in the court at the back," the man replied; "only a cloister and the bell-tower."

Thorburn was raising the glass to his lips. He set it down untasted.

"Apparently our wine is not to your liking?" Morelli remarked.

"The room is close, I feel stifled."

Obeying a gesture of her husband, Bianca opened the other door, opposite to which Thorburn was sitting, and admitted a brilliant flood of sunshine.

Outside, in the light and heat, was a spacious weed-grown courtyard, encumbered with wood-stacks, oil-presses, and heaps of hay and straw.

At one side was a damp, dilapidated stone cloister; at the end, a ruined Lombard tower.

The artist put his hands before his eyes as if the light dazzled him.

He felt a creeping chill among the roots of his hair, and his hands, burning hot a moment ago, were suddenly damp and cold. Plainly as if it were then before him, he could see the dark vault, the prostrate figure, the dreadful red stain on the stone floor —

For a moment horror paralysed him, but that weakness passed, and left him deadly calm. His hand was steady, his senses quickened, his nerves braced to meet danger in any shape. He furtively felt in the breast pocket of his coat to make sure that something without which he never travelled was still there, then rose, and approached the door.

"Are those the ruins? They are picturesque. I should like to have a nearer view of them."

"Scusa," Morelli returned, "we do not make a show of them. If you are curious in old stones there are plenty to be seen elsewhere."

"But I have heard that these are particularly interesting," Thorburn answered deliberately; "that there is a vault or crypt under the tower."

"Who told you that?" The exclamation seemed to have escaped him involuntarily. He bit his lip, and added hastily: "There is no crypt; at least, I know of none."

"Perhaps you have not looked for it? Curious discoveries are made in such places sometimes." He spoke the last words looking the other full in the eyes.

Morelli's face changed—turned ashy pale, haggard, terrible; and his hand stole to his waistband. But he checked himself, and, after a moment's pause, said, with a sudden and sinister change of manner to ironical courtesy: "Well, signor, if you are bent on making discoveries, I will not thwart you. You shall see the tower. Come with us, *mia bella*," he added, turning to his wife, who was standing motionless in the shadow at the end of the room.

She came forward, moving mechanically, like a sleep-walker ; her eyes fixed upon her husband's face.

"Go first," he said, drawing back for her to pass. She preceded them out of the house and across the courtyard to the entrance of the tower ; there she paused, and stood in the arch, with her hand on a projecting fragment of masonry, while Morelli and the artist entered.

Thorburn looked round. The place was like and unlike the scene of his vision. The general features were the same, but the details differed. The tower was roofless ; overhead was a space of cloudless sky, where a flock of pigeons fluttered, white against the blue. Heaps of débris encumbered the floor, and were piled against the walls. No door was visible. As he looked round in perplexity, his eyes lighted on Bianca's face. With one lightning glance, unobserved by her husband, she indicated a point in the wall opposite to the entrance. He took but one stride towards it, and began to tear away the rubbish that was heaped against it—hastily, fiercely, flinging the stones behind him, regardless where they fell. Behind, deep-set in the massive masonry, was a low, nail-studded door.

He looked round at Morelli, pointing to it without a word. The latter approached. There was an ill-omened smile on his lips, but his face was white, and his eyes had a look of menace not to be mistaken.

"The signor is a magician, truly. Such knowledge is wonderful—and a little dangerous. It is always dangerous to know too much." Then, with a gesture of mock courtesy, he added : "Eccellenza ! I follow you."

Thorburn had his hand upon the bolt, but before he could draw it, a voice behind cried, "Stay—stay !" and a hand grasped his arm. It was Bianca. Bianca—so transformed by excitement that she looked like another woman. The stony, apathetic expression had fallen from her face like a mask ; her eyes were dilated, and a scarlet spot burned in her cheeks.

"You must not pass that door till you have heard what I have to tell you," she panted. "Ay ! I will speak now, though you kill me the next moment," she added, turning to her husband with a gesture of defiance. "The signor shall know all—and so shall you. I have something to tell that you do not dream of."

Morelli looked at her stupidly ; he seemed too amazed at the change in her to take in the sense of her words.

"I know or guess the worst already," Thorburn said solemnly. "I know that my friend lies in the vault under our feet. I believe that he has been foully murdered ——"

"No, no !" she interrupted, triumphantly ; "not murdered—for he is alive !"

The two men uttered a simultaneous exclamation—Thorburn of joy, the Italian of rage and incredulity.

"It is false!" he shouted furiously, threatening her with his hand; "clever as you are, you could not bring your lover to life again."

She looked at him with a smile of scorn. "My lover? I never saw him till yesterday, when he came to the door to ask for a drink of water. He begged me—as courteously as if I had been a queen—to let him draw my face, to put in a picture he was painting. I consented; where was the harm? but he had hardly begun, when you burst into the place—you had been watching me, I suppose, as usual—insulted him, struck me, and, when he interposed to defend me from your violence—O Dio! shall I ever forget seeing him fall at my feet?"

She shuddered, and hid her face in her hands.

"But listen," she went on breathlessly. "When I was hiding in this place last night—for I could not breathe under the roof that sheltered you—I heard a sound in the vault below. It was a voice—the voice of the man you had left there for dead—crying for help. I hurried back to the house, got a lantern, a flask of wine, and some other things, and went down into the vault. There he lay, on the damp stones, bleeding to death in the dark. He was conscious, but his mind wandered. He took me for an angel, and said such wild, beautiful things! I bound up his wound, and sat with him all night, putting wine to his lips to keep the life in him. Towards morning he fell into a stupor, and then I left him, piling up the stones outside the door, as I found them. You kept close watch upon me, but if you had tied me hand and foot I would have found a way, before the sun was high, to escape and denounce you!"

With a hoarse cry of rage he rushed upon her, knife in hand. Thorburn interposed just in time; and, placing himself before her, drew out his revolver. Savage and desperate, the man made a snatch at it, wrenched it from his grasp, and pointed it full in his face. Quick as thought, the artist struck up his arm. There was a flash, a sharp report, and Morelli staggered backwards, and fell headlong, shot through the brain.

The first moment of stupefaction past, Thorburn bent over the body, and turned the face upwards. After one glance, he rose.

"Your husband brought his death upon himself," he said, gravely; "but if you had told me the truth when I spoke to you at the door, this might have been avoided."

"Signor—forgive me! I tried to speak, but—but with his eyes upon me, I durst not. You do not know what he was," she added, in a shuddering whisper, with a side-long glance at the prostrate figure—never more to be feared now.

Thorburn looked at her compassionately. "I understand," he said gently; "I will not reproach you. Come—let us waste no more time. There is a life to be saved;" and, drawing back the heavy bolt, he descended the steps into the crypt.

An oil-lamp in one corner diffused a feeble circle of light around,

leaving the extremities of the vaulted chamber in obscurity. Near the light, on a heap of straw and rugs, lay Desmond, with an awful stillness and pallor on his face, which made the handsome features seem unfamiliar to his friend.

"We are too late!" groaned Thorburn.

"No, signor; he is only in a swoon, just as I left him." She put back the damp, disordered hair from his forehead. "How beautiful he is!" she murmured, with a sort of awe; "like the pictures of the blessed St. John."

Her touch seemed to rouse him. His eyes unclosed and rested on her face.

"You are still here? Oh, you are kinder than my friend," he whispered. "I called to him—till my voice failed—but he never came."

Those words gave Thorburn a curious thrill. "I am here now, Frank, old fellow," he said huskily; but Desmond had already relapsed into insensibility.

"He must not remain here; but can you help me to carry him, Bianca?"

"Yes, yes," she assented eagerly, extending her strong white arms.

Between them they bore him up the steps, across the courtyard, and into the house, and laid him down on the bed in an inner chamber—a bed which he was not destined to leave for many a weary day.

"Here's a pretty state of things! I must have been as blind as a bat not to have seen it before."

It was Thorburn who spoke, and the words were addressed to himself in a tone of vexation and perplexity.

Three weeks had passed away, and Desmond, thanks partly to an excellent constitution, but chiefly to Bianca's tender nursing, had "healed him of his grievous wound," and was pronounced by the worthy leech of San Giovanni to be quite well enough to travel. But he showed a reluctance to leave his present quarters, which Thorburn was at a loss to understand, till, on returning from a sketching expedition one afternoon, he was accidentally the witness of a scene which let a flood of light into his mind, and caused him to utter the ejaculation recorded above.

Desmond, white and gaunt, but as handsome as ever, lay on the turf in the shadow of the chestnut trees at the side of the house. Bianca sat near him; she had a tress of straw in her fingers, but she was not plaiting. Her hands lay idle on her lap, her eyes were downcast. Never had she looked so lovely as at this moment, when her face was transfigured by some new and sweet emotion.

Leaning on his elbow and his side, and looking at her with all his heart in his eyes, Desmond was speaking earnestly, passionately; evidently pleading his cause with all a lover's eloquence.

Thorburn saw her give him one quick glance, in which joy and sadness were strangely mingled ; saw him take her hands, and draw her nearer, till her golden hair brushed his lips—then, suddenly becoming conscious that he was playing the spy, he went indoors, and sat down at the table near the window. “H’m—well, if he *will* make a fool of himself, he must. Certainly she is a lovely creature, and she saved his life, and—— Anyhow, I can’t interfere.” He had not long arrived at this conclusion, when, to his surprise, Bianca entered. There was a look on her face which made him exclaim : “What is the matter ? Is Desmond worse ?”

“No, signor, he is better,” she said quietly ; “so much better that he can spare me now. So I am going.”

“Going !” he echoed ; “going where ?”

“To the Convent of Corellia. Lucia will take charge of the house till I return—if I ever return. Perhaps, by-and-by, I shall take the veil.”

He looked at her without speaking. She stood before him in an attitude of composed and patient melancholy, her hands folded before her, her eyes veiled by their white lids.

“Does my friend know ?” he asked at length.

Her lips quivered.

“No, I—could not tell him. You will tell him to-night, when I am gone.”

“He will be deeply hurt at your leaving him in this way. You must know that he ——”

“Yes,” she interrupted, “I know. It is because I know it that I leave him. Signor, he has just asked me to be his wife—me,” she repeated, with a smile of self-pity. “Look at me, and think of it.”

Thorburn did look at her, standing before him in her matchless loveliness, and, regardless of prudence, said what came into his mind. “Your beauty would grace any station.”

“My beauty—and when that fades, what is there left to charm him ? I am an ignorant peasant. I could not live his life, or think his thoughts. Sooner or later he would weary of me, and then—then my heart would break.”

She was silent a moment.

“No, no,” she continued. “It is a hundred times impossible ! He will grieve for a while, but the world is all before him : he will soon—yes, soon forget.”

“And you, Bianca ?”

She looked out through the window, as if she were looking into the dim vista of years to come.

“And I—shall remember,” she murmured, as she turned away.